



The Class of '73

For period instrument ensembles, the last 50 years have been golden

By Inge Kjemtrup

What was it about early 1970s that made it such a fruitful time for period instrument ensembles? There must have been something in the air that inspired a handful of young musicians to champion a new, more scholarly approach to performance of Baroque and Classical music. The Class of '73 was particularly dynamic and includes Boston Baroque, the Academy of Ancient Music (AAM), the English Concert, and the Taverner Consort and Players.

Much has changed in the intervening 50 years. Period instrument ensembles are well established around the world and playing standards continue to rise. Most importantly, audience understanding of how music of the Baroque and Classical eras should sound has changed markedly.

What made the 1970s so fertile a time for period instrument ensembles? "A spirit of freedom and of inquiry and a kind of rejection of the status quo are all in the mix," answers Academy of Ancient Music chief executive John McMunn. "But a huge part of the particular alchemy was the foundational experiments with [Nikolaus] Harnoncourt and Gustav Leonhardt in Europe." Both Christopher Hogwood, the co-founder of the Academy of Ancient Music, and Boston Baroque founder Martin Pearlman studied harpsichord in Amsterdam with Leonhardt, for instance.

Nicholas Kenyon, former director of the BBC Proms and of London's Barbican Centre, is writing

a book on the modern revival of period instruments and has given some thought as to why 1973 was significant. "Two things especially prepared the way for the sudden outburst of 1973," he says. "First was the growth of really skilful modern instrument chamber orchestras like the Academy of St Martin in the Fields with Neville Marriner and the English Chamber Orchestra with Raymond Leppard, who stimulated the taste for 18th-century repertoire. The second was the long-standing English interest in renaissance instruments, viol consorts, and the like."

Kenyon adds, "So when AAM, English Concert, and Taverner started to gather on period instruments, there were players from these two strands coming together—sideways from modern instruments and forward from renaissance instruments. Suddenly there was a critical mass of performers, and it took off."

That "critical mass" was led by extraordinary musicians. "It's a kind of confluence of zeitgeist and individuals," says McMunn. "It's that combination of a kind of spirit of the times with people who were in the right place at the right time."

"If one scrolls back 50 years, a lot of the sound [of period instrument ensembles] was dictated by the parameters of what was technically possible with players at that time, who were rediscovering all these old techniques," says AAM's McMunn, a San Francisco Bay Area transplant who enjoyed a career as a tenor before turning to arts management. "As

◀ From top row, left to right: Boston Baroque, Martin Pearlman, Christopher Hogwood, Academy of Ancient Music, the English Concert, Trevor Pinnock, Andrew Parrott, the Taverner Consort and Players

the players have developed their technical ability, the sound has grown and matured. There's much more freedom around how we think about interpretation, which used to be a dirty word. Increasingly, there's an understanding that in the 18th century, the treatises reference the fundamental duty of the performer—to move the soul of the listener.

"In the early days, there was more of a sense that the authenticity of the project was important," he adds. "There was a feeling of getting it right that was vital to the development of the movement, to the foundations of the music academically."

Boston Baroque's Pearlman echoes McMunn's observations. Moving to Boston after his studies in Europe and then Yale, Pearlman gathered together a small group of like-minded period instrument musicians. "In the beginning, we had to learn to play in tune with each other, playing on gut strings and different temperaments. Ultimately that became solid by really listening to each other more than any kind of theoretical discussions."

Across the Atlantic, Hogwood had been immersing himself in period performance since his days at Pembroke College, Cambridge. With Decca record producer Peter Wadland, he founded the Academy of Ancient Music, naming it after a similarly dubbed 18th-century ensemble.

For all groups, there is a continuing conversation about authenticity.

"Christopher Hogwood would look for the part books and say, 'These were the players we know were there, and these are the parts that we know exist,'" says McMunn. "That was the starting point. Whereas now the discourse across the whole movement is more interested in what players were involved in at the time. What were the circumstances of performance? Were people sharing parts? Could there have been other performers? There's a bit more of a sense of a fantasy re-creation as opposed to historical re-creation. So instead of saying, 'This is what we know happened,' we say, 'This is something that could have happened.' And isn't that interesting?"

That said, McMunn says the AAM is still "interested in what we know rather than in just what we can imagine. My personal artistic ethos is that historical performance is a methodology and not a repertoire. And we

are limited by our understanding of the instruments. So stringed instrument setup is important. Bows are obviously really important. String makeup is really important. And stringing at different sorts of tensions can have a huge effect."

Asked what distinguishes Boston Baroque from other ensembles, Pearlman says, "We really like to play out. I feel if you get the right kind of players, with the right kind of sensibility and good instruments, then you can just let them go as opposed to having to pull things back. To me, that makes it much more exciting. I always think of the image of riding on a horse, leaning forward and letting the wind sweep through your hair as opposed to sitting very upright properly."

"Everything in Baroque music is dance," comments McMunn. Pearlman agrees. "A lot of music of the period is underlaid by dance rhythms. It is like speaking. A Baroque bow for example, is easier to speak with and get into the fine detail of a variable dynamic, even within a note."

Happily, there are no rules for period instrument groups to follow when it comes

to chronological boundaries for repertoire. Boston Baroque has played all of the Beethoven symphonies and, at the other end of the timeline, music by Cherubini and Monteverdi. "I love 19th-century music, but there are kind of diminishing returns the farther you go into the 19th century," says Pearlman. "To me, it doesn't cry out for some historical approach because it's been a continuous tradition, unlike the Baroque."

Pearlman says that he's "always been interested in going more deeply into [the past] as opposed to going later." As an example, he cites a recording Boston Baroque made for Telarc of 18th-century Moravian American music. "Benjamin Franklin reports on going to hear the Moravians perform. They did the first performances in this country of Haydn's *Creation*, of Mozart and Handel works."

For McMunn's part, he says, "I'm hesitant to put too much of a limit because I think that is a failure of imagination. Realistically, AAM probably has an 1830 kind of limit." But in a recent concert they performed the Mendelssohn violin concerto, which dates from the mid-1840s.



LUKE KOCH DE GOOREVIND

McMunn is hugely proud of that concert at a packed Barbican Hall. It wasn't just the characterful wind playing that pleased him but also the intonation using a higher-than-usual pitch standard of 438Hz. "We had a lot of conversations about the pitch standard. If the primary objective always is moving the soul of the listener, then no one's going to care if it's historical if it doesn't sound good. There was a risk, but at every stage in the development of the movement, we've taken risks and been able to rise to the particular challenges."

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AAM's birth date is officially September 17, 1973, but they are [scheduled at press time] to bring it forward in August at the BBC Proms with "a rather spectacular performance of Handel's *Samson*." The season will also include Handel's *Water Music* and *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, along with a complete cycle of the Brandenburg concertos. "Hogwood didn't perform very much Bach with the orchestra," says McMunn, "but it was hugely important" during his successor Richard Egarr's tenure and now with the third musical director, Laurence Cummings.

The AAM anniversary season offers an intriguing concert of music from the court of Empress Maria Theresa. It includes



Haydn and Mozart, as well as Maria Teresa Agnesi and Marianna Martinez, female composers at the court. Another program focuses on Ignatius Sancho, an enslaved Black man who was brought to London and then subsequently freed. "In addition to poetry and other writings, he published four volumes of music in his lifetime, much of which has been lost. But an American countertenor named Reginald Mobley has done a huge amount of work finding the music that still exists," says McMunn.

Besides a Beethoven Ninth Symphony performance, Boston Baroque's 50th season will include popular works such as Handel's *Messiah*, Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, and Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.

ask Pearlman and McMunn about the impact of the period instrument movement and why they think their ensembles have lasted for 50 years. "I'm in the habit of saying now that it's really fundamentally revolutionized not just the performance of 17th- and 18th-century music in a historically informed style, but really modern music making as well," says McMunn. "I don't think anyone plays Beethoven the same way that they played it in the seventies."

As for why the AAM has endured: "Hogwood was very, very clear that he wanted the Academy of Ancient Music to survive him. He stepped back from sole management directorship of the orchestra at the height of his powers specifically because he knew that the ground had to be laid for the orchestra to have a life beyond his own. His legacy lives on in the work that we're continuing to do."

Pearlman reflects on how the musical environment has changed for musicians over the last 50 years. "When we started out, you had to learn a lot from reading and researching and studying instruments and what people said about playing. Whereas now, in a funny way, it's a little bit more like it was back in the day when people didn't have to read about something. They would have a teacher who taught them, or they'd be surrounded by performances that they could hear.

"People sometimes ask me what surprised me the most in these 50 years," he says. "And I usually say, the whole thing! I didn't expect it. I wasn't thinking about 50 years—it's just always been doing that next thing that seems exciting to me. But there was this response from the beginning, a very interested audience." ■